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William H. Webster, Director

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Alcoholism and the Policeman

Identifying and Dealing with the Problem

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* For many years, police have been seen as the last resort when tragedy strikes others. They are expected to handle all types of people with all types of problems. Whether it be mediating a family dispute, finding a lost child, counseling a victim of a crime, or assisting an alcoholic, the police officer is viewed as the answer to the problem or the conduit through which an answer can be found. Society, the police department, and the individual officer all expect the police person to cope with these incidents and restore order. However, when the person responsible for solving problems for others has a problem himself, society often is disillusioned, the department is confounded, and the individual officer is bewildered and confused.

The disillusionment weighs upon everyone whose expectations of police go beyond the capabilities of any individual or group of human beings. There is a tendency for society, the department, and individual officers to some-

how overlook the fact that the person in uniform is an individual with the same frailties and weaknesses as others. But being a member of the human race entitles police to have the same kind of problems—be they related to occupation, family, finance, or to any other difficulty which adversely affects people—as the rest of society.

The object of this article is to examine the police officer with a drinking problem, and to explore the various alternatives available to the individual and the department which might alleviate this problem.

Approaches to the Problem

Both private industry and law enforcement have attempted various approaches to deal with the problem employee, but many administrators and supervisors have little, if any, background in understanding alcoholism. More often the victim is regarded with contempt rather than understanding. He is considered a moral weakling, lacking in willpower. The American Medical Association, however, recog-

nizes alcoholism for what it is—a chronic, progressive disease which, if left untreated, can cause permanent damage, physical incapacities, or death.

In a profession where a partner system exists and one's survival may be dependent on another, there is sometimes an unwritten code which precludes informing on one's fellow officer. This attitude is evident in cases in which an officer works with a fellow officer knowing he has a drinking problem and continues to ride patrol with him (even if he is drinking) rather than refusing to work with him or reporting the behavior to a supervisor. This attitude can even extend to supervisors who, with the best intentions, are unable to confront the officer regarding his behavior and instead choose to ignore the problem, hoping it will pass or the individual will eventually retire or resign.

All too often the peace officer may be retired after 20 to 25 years of tension-provoking field assignments to

have the obvious limitations for their proximity to the individual. Even a portable radio cannot be readily used at all times and in all places, i.e., staff meetings, church, undercover work, etc., due to the noise factor, bulkiness, or security. Finally, telephone calls or alerting systems are only successful if the individual(s) to be contacted are at their own or a predetermined telephone. Should the individual be in transit between telephone locations, attending to personal business, or at a location where there is no telephone available contact by this method is simply not possible.

Pagers, on the other hand, rarely result in out-of-contact situations. Unless the individual shuts it off or an equipment failure occurs, immediate contact under nearly any circumstance is possible. The cost of a department-owned paging system as an add-on to an existing police radio network can be cheaper than a single two-way radio unit. For example, the paging control unit of one major manufacturer sells for less than \$300. With an inexpensive connecting cable, this unit can be readily installed on an existing base-station transceiver, and can have the capacity of five separate paging units. Other systems are available with greater capacity or flexibility at greater costs.

An individual paging unit presently costs less than \$200 for a combination voice and tone model; the cost is considerably less for only a "beeper" unit. It has been predicted that further miniaturization of the microcircuits currently used in pagers will continue to drop costs to under \$100 per unit. Although not considered by some police administrators as overall desirable as agency-owned and controlled equipment, a single pager can be rented from commercial companies for an approximate rate of \$25 per month. These rates drop to about \$10 a month if the pager unit is purchased from the company.

Several additional cost factors should also be considered. With the continuing improvements in the state-of-the-art of radio communications, large capital expenditure on radio equipment is not justifiable if the equipment soon becomes technologically

obsolete. As manufacturers discontinue models, parts and service can also become a problem. Paging systems, however, represent a considerably lower capital investment, and therefore, are less costly to modernize or replace. In fact, the main thrust in the paging industry appears to be toward making smaller an already small product. Additionally, some manufacturers of both two-way and radio paging communications systems readily admit that the upkeep and repair costs of a paging system is also considerably less. This latter savings can be a significant

"American businesses and industries are currently reviving a radio communications technique previously thought to have only limited applications in the public sector—radio paging."

one for both small departments on tight budgets, as well as for large departments with numerous radio resources.

A second benefit of a paging system is a reduction of radio traffic on already overcrowded radio frequencies, thus significantly improving the quality of existing communications. Important radio transmissions, some of which were previously unheard due to excessive radio traffic or background noise, can be selectively directed to the individual for which they are intended, minimizing the possibility of missed vital information. Additionally, many routine matters can be directed through telephone communications by a simple beep, thus further reducing unnecessary crowding of essential emergency frequencies.

Pagers come in all sizes, shapes, colors, and with a full line of their own options and accessories. There are

tone-only pagers, tone and voice pagers, and number readout pagers, soon to be marketed, that can receive and display specific phone numbers to call. There are small wrist pagers, and pagers that have two different tones; one tells you to call the office, the other to call home. A detective on a stakeout can use a model that vibrates instead of beeping. Some pagers have memory switches to tell you to check for pagers after leaving a meeting, for instance. There are pagers that can be used for radio channel monitoring, and pagers that are made for conference-style multiple alerts. Even burglar alarms can be hooked up to activate beepers. Applications of paging systems are limited by the imagination of the user, and only temporarily, by technology. Certain commercial rental companies can currently expand paging coverage beyond normal transmitting range, up to and including multi-State capabilities. Experiments with satellite links are also being conducted.

Finally, the morale of key individuals within departments should not be overlooked. Those people who must constantly restrict their activities due to their on-call function, can benefit greatly by the additions of a paging system to a radio network. Pagers are small, lightweight, and can be worn comfortably. Unlike bulky and noisy radios, and the trouble of constantly relaying telephone numbers, pagers permit these personnel freedom of movement to lead a more normal lifestyle, while making them even more readily available to respond to contingency situations.

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a future of inactivity and alcohol. He may have been subjected early in his career to the idea that alcohol was the panacea for many discouragements. If he then experiences job-related frustrations, he may use alcohol to remove or solve problems he is having outside of the job. It is precisely at this point that the department may have to contend with an alcoholic employee. The progression of alcoholism may be extremely rapid, and its rate will vary among problem drinkers. The amount of alcohol consumed or the length of time involved have a minimal impact on whether or not the employee may express alcoholic tendencies.

Due to the individualized progression of the disease, the alcoholic may be afflicted at different ages and career levels. Because alcoholism is accompanied by a variety of other problems and difficulties, the victim and the employer become confused and frustrated as to the nature of the problem and how to effect a remedy.

The alcoholic fears losing his job since it provides respectability and the necessary rationale to continue to deny the alcoholism. He may relinquish his property, even friends and family, but the job appears to be the last thing the working alcoholic wants to give up.

It is practically impossible for even an enlightened department to provide resources aimed at helping the alcoholic resolve family, financial, emotional, and job-related problems effectively if it fails to direct the officer into an alcohol recovery program first. It should be obvious to any employer that an employee suffering from the later stages of alcoholism will be unable to solve various problems if he is unable or unwilling to deal with alcoholism.

Recognizing this fact, many companies in private industry have established employee assistance programs that have been extremely successful in rehabilitating the problem employee to a full and productive worker. Most programs operate with a 70 to 85 percent rate of success. However, it must be remembered that private industry is in

business to make money. Although these programs are humanitarian in nature, they are also of value in terms of increased productivity and profits. If one considers only the costs of training new employees, sick days wasted, long lunches, and the increasing frequency of work-related accidents, these programs prove valuable to the agency. The fact that as a result of programs such as these, an individual of depreciated productivity and self-esteem can be restored to a full-functioning member of society cannot be discounted. This is the most valuable contribution we can make to a fellow human being.

A Program for Law Enforcement

The success of many of the programs in private industry has caused progressive-thinking law enforcement officials to implement programs similar to those proven in the private sector. The approach recognizes the grim statistics—1 out of every 10 people in our society has a drinking problem and a



John Stratton



Brian Wroe



Sheriff Peter J. Pitchess

large percentage of people with drinking problems are members of the work force, with only approximately 3 percent comprising "skidrow" alcoholics.

Law enforcement personnel are people and therefore should have the same rate of alcoholism as is found in other professions. There have been popular treatises in books, movies, and literature dealing with police and often implied in these works is the idea that many police have drinking problems. Although there are no verifiable statistics, it would appear that they should be about the same as the norm. As more research develops on the stressfulness of police work and the often inappropriate method of stress reduction through alcohol consumption, one might make a case for the higher incidence of alcoholism. Whatever the actual percentage, problem employees must be dealt with by the law enforcement agency for the good of everyone involved.

A program established by the sheriff of Los Angeles County was the result of a combined effort on the part of several recovered alcoholic officers, the department psychologist, and the administration. The purpose was to provide an avenue for employees troubled by their drinking to find a way to correct their problem.

Several aspects of this program were considered essential:

1. Confidentiality or anonymity for anyone seeking assistance from the program;
2. Employee awareness of the program and aspects of alcohol; and
3. Supervisory training regarding the program and appropriate methods of supervision.

Recognizing the problem is the first step to its resolution; taking steps to correct the problem is the next phase. People who have problems do not need others to know of them in order for the problem to be resolved. Since anonymity is a concern of the alcoholic, confidentiality becomes of utmost importance. The need for department knowledge is nonexistent as

long as the individual functions well and effectively on the job. The department's and the supervisor's responsibility is to ensure the employee performs his duties properly, not to determine whether the employee is or is not an alcoholic. The program in Los Angeles is based on anonymity and is a method for those who wish to seek assistance for their problem; it is not punitive.

Because of problems related to alcohol in the law enforcement profession, it would appear appropriate that

"It is practically impossible for even an enlightened department to provide resources aimed at helping the alcoholic resolve family, financial, emotional, and job-related problems effectively if it fails to direct the officer into an alcohol recovery program first."

the department and concerned officers develop their own program. It would also be extremely beneficial if the agency had access to recovering alcoholics in its ranks who would volunteer to become involved in the program. In recognition of the high recovery rate characteristic of organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, fellowship of this nature should be utilized whenever possible. The program, sanctioned by the sheriff and under the auspices of the Psychological Services Unit, is experiencing great success. Although it is sanctioned, the group remains completely autonomous and confidential. Absolutely no records are maintained involving membership or attendance.

Because the problems experienced by law enforcement personnel are similar, even though the officers work for separate agencies, the program in Los Angeles County is open to any active or retired law enforcement

personnel in the area. There are personnel from over eight agencies involved, including employees from county, city, State, and Federal departments. The program is conducted by police officers themselves, and as a result, a helping fellowship has developed which provides additional support among the officers. There is no cost to any department. The program is conducted on a free and voluntary basis by the members whose sole remuneration is the knowledge that they have assisted a fellow officer toward recovery and a more rewarding life.

Employee awareness and confidence in the confidentiality of the program are essential. Awareness and understanding of the program can be promoted through several means, such as announcements in monthly department newsletters, explanations of the program at station meetings or in-service training, and at classes for personnel at various management levels in the organization.

In addition, instruction about alcohol and its debilitating effects can inform personnel and make them more cognizant of various aspects of alcohol. Illustrative and educational pamphlets can also be developed.

The supervisor, as an employee, needs to be aware of alcoholic behavior, the department's program, and its value to individuals. In addition, he needs to be cognizant of methods of identifying problem employees and the possible manifestations of alcoholism, such as excessive absenteeism (often someone other than the employee calling in), unreported absences, arriving late and/or leaving early, poor quality work, erratic performance, lowered productivity, friction with coworkers, and increased accident rates.

In addition, supervisors need to know their department's responsibilities and the methods and approaches of dealing with problem employees. Supervisors should know that part of their job with problem employees involves:

1. Documenting specific instances of deteriorating work performance;



2. Having a frank and firm discussion with the employee regarding poor performance;
3. Explaining to the employee that unless he or she voluntarily decides to seek help, his or her job will be in jeopardy;
4. Suggesting that the employee consider contacting the department psychologist's office for confidential counseling, and/or involvement in the alcoholism program; and
5. Insuring the employee that the psychologist or alcoholism counselor *will not* discuss this meeting with his employer, if they decide that as the supervisor, they should make the appointment for the employee. (The only information that will be given is whether the employee kept his appointment or not.)

If needed, the department psychologist's office can provide supervisors with consultation on methods of working with problem employees.

Following are recommendations of appropriate and inappropriate behavior for supervisors in working with problem employees:

DO

Make it clear that the supervisor is concerned only with job performance. Unless performance improves, the employee's job is in jeopardy.

Explain that the employee must decide for himself/herself whether or not to accept assistance.

Emphasize that all aspects of the department psychologist's office and alcoholism program are completely *Confidential and Anonymous*.

DON'T

Try to diagnose the problem.

Discuss drinking unless it occurs on the job.

Moralize.

Be misled by sympathy-evoking tactics, at which the problem employee or alcoholic becomes an expert.

Pin a label (alcoholic, neurotic, addict) on anyone who has not first labeled himself/herself.

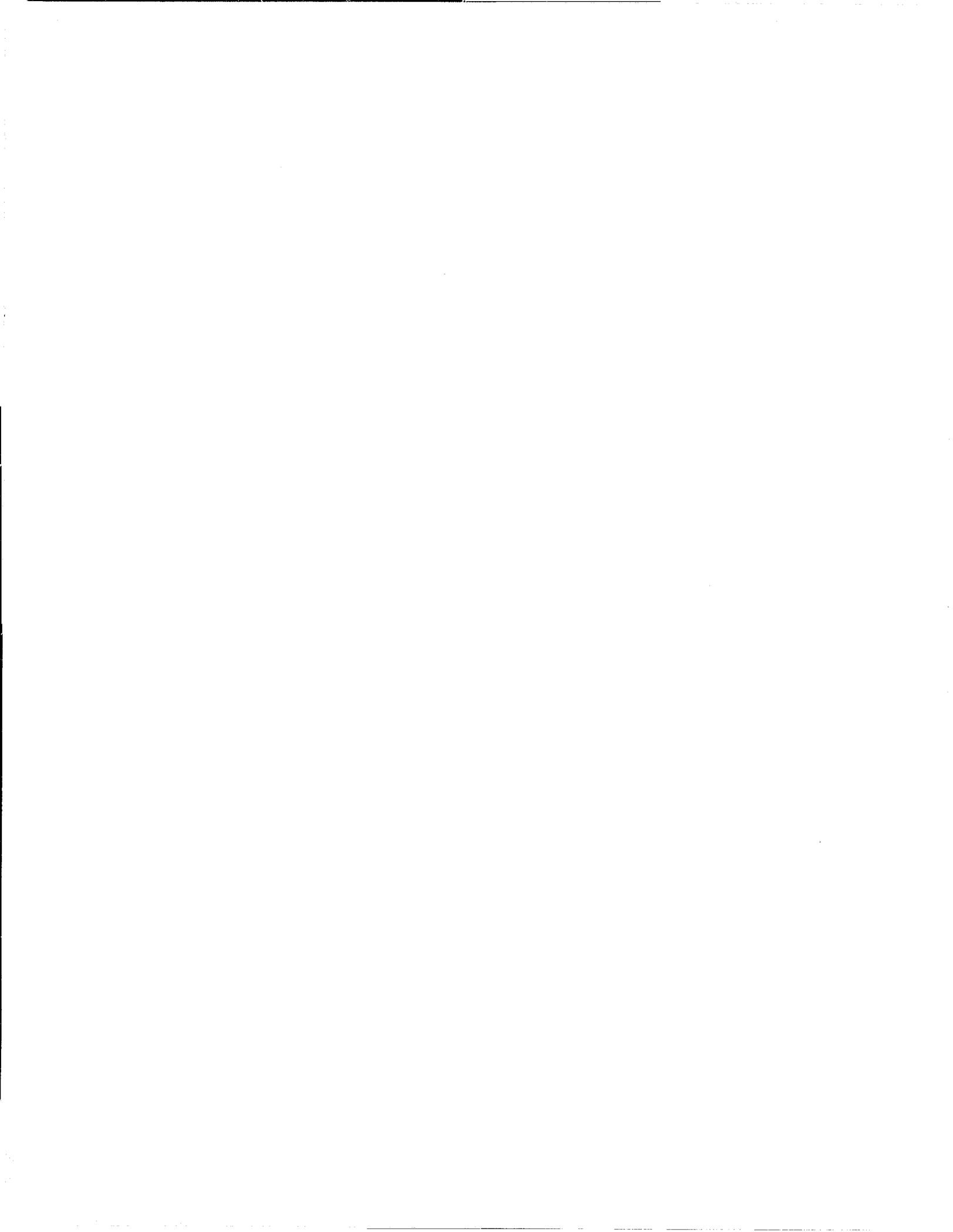
Cover-up for a friend. Misguided kindness can lead to a serious delay in real help reaching him/her.

Supervisors must keep in mind that the sooner the problem is identified and dealt with, the more likely a satisfactory solution will be reached—a solution that will benefit the department, the supervisor, the employee, and the community which they serve.

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